

# Animators Unearthed

A Guide to the Best of Contemporary Animation

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## CHAPTER 5

# PES Play

Okay, first things first: what's with the PES name? With the exception of Dutch animator Rosto A.D., there aren't many animators around using nicknames. Animators are for the most part a pretty low-key group of folks. "Pes is a family nickname. It comes from my last name, Pesapane [his first name is Adam], which Americans have a terrible time pronouncing or writing correctly. I once received mail addressed to 'Propane.' It's just easier this way — PES . . . except in a noisy bar, where people tend to hear the word PISS."

And no, it ain't after the candy — that's PEZ. This is PES (rhymes with Les, as in Les Nessman from *WKRP in Cincinnati*). Still, the thing is that PES's work is very much like candy, or eye candy. The New York animator sticks out from the crowd with strikingly original and playful stop-motion works that use everyday objects and put them in an entirely new context; for example, in PES's *The Fireplace* — the world's first animated instant TV fireplace — he uses pretzels and candy corn to create a roaring fake fire for those cold nights in your hearthless home). All the more impressive is the fact that, like Aaron Augenblick, PES has managed to successfully straddle the border between commercial and independent work without giving up his artistic integrity.

Born in Dover, New Jersey, PES says that he was always

interested in art. "I learned how to paint watercolors at an early age. But I was also an athlete; I played soccer and tennis and excelled at both, so that definitely offset any ribbing that I may have taken simply as the 'artist' of the class."

After studying English literature and printmaking at the University of Virginia, PES got a rather uninspiring job at an advertising agency in New York. Using his ample free time, PES watched various music videos, commercials and short films that the agency received and became inspired to make his own films. And that's precisely what he did, but there was one minor problem: PES didn't know anything about filmmaking. "Basically I had to figure out how to make the thing myself," says PES. "I never went to school for film, so I didn't know anything about cameras. I borrowed a 16mm camera (a cheap Russian camera called the Krasnogorsk) from some guy at the agency who was too busy with his day job to use it. I took it home on the weekends and shot rolls of 16mm reversal film, experimenting with lenses, etc. I got my hands on an old 16mm projector and watched the dailies against the white wall in my bedroom. This is how I learned to use a camera."

His first film, *Dogs of War* (1998), shows kids playing in a field when abruptly their serenity is interrupted by the sound of bomber planes. The kids flee in terror — or do they? Turns out they're racing to catch falling hot dog wieners.

While the film was shot in live-action, it already anticipates PES's animation work through the use of absurd humor, placing everyday objects in unfamiliar situations and slick editing that clearly shows an influence of advertising films.

*Dogs of War* was based on "a surreal dream of bombers dropping

hot dogs on Dresden." PES used his "free" time at the agency to draw storyboards, tinker with the concept and solicit feedback from his colleagues. Once he felt comfortable with the story structure, he started to make the film, but it was then that he discovered another stumbling block: money. PES wanted to use authentic WWII bombing footage, but realized that the licensing fees would cost — wait for it — a bomb, so he came up with another idea. "I called a military stock footage house, pitched the head of the company my idea, and asked if he could help me out by donating some specific footage. He did. A week later I got the high res tape in the mail."

It shouldn't come as a surprise that, although they come from very different times and worlds, the first animator to really knock PES on his ass was Jan Svankmajer, the Czech surrealist master well known for his object animation. "In 1997," recalls PES, "I stumbled into a screening of Svankmajer's feature film *Conspirators of Pleasure* at the Film Forum in New York City. I remember being impressed first and foremost by the lack of dialogue in the film. That was really exciting for me. I was also intrigued by the random bits of object animation sprinkled throughout the picture."

After the screening, PES headed out to find Svankmajer's films on video and was blown away by the work. "I studied it frame by frame. It opened a real door of perception for me about what could be done by moving objects around. It wasn't long before I had some ideas of my own."

While PES had drawing skills, he found that object animation was more appealing because it allowed him to work faster by bringing, as he says, "ideas to life without having to first worry

about drawing these objects or rendering and texturing them. It was just grab it and go. I liked how it took the focus off the act of recreating an object and instead placed it on what ideas you can generate with that object.”

Around this time, PES and Phelps had an electrical fire in their apartment. "The sockets started smoking one day and I lost a lot of equipment in this power surge — a stereo, clock radio, microwave, etc. Before I took this stuff out to the garbage I tore into it with a hammer and removed all the circuit boards. I laid

them on the kitchen table and saw immediately it looked like a city from an aerial perspective.”

For several months, PES built a city using salt and peppershakers, old flashlights and other objects. Once the city was done, PES didn't really know what to do with it; the model just collected dust in a corner of the apartment until one day PES decided to get rid of the thing. It was at that moment, an idea struck: “Why not craft a film around the act of destroying it?” The result was *KaBoom!* (2004) — one of PES's strongest and most successful films.

A city is on alert as a bomber plane attacks. From here, PES's visual magic takes over: we see clown heads on machine guns, popcorn bullets, missile matches, exploding gift-wrap ribbons, peanut bombs and a final attack that sees the city annihilated Christmas tree balls. *KaBoom!* is a visual feast that cleverly appropriates images of peace (notably Christmas decorations) for the purposes of war. Is it a subtle comment on religious violence, an anti-Christmas film or just the inspired imaginings of a man who remembers what it is to be a child? Every kid has — okay, most boys have — played war games with their toys. Through their senses, war becomes fun, exciting and even pleasant. *KaBoom!* is just that: a vision of war through the animated eyes of a child.

*KaBoom!* had originally been a 30-second piece called *Atomic Nut*. It started, PES says, as “just another peanut film.” Then he got a call from the clothing company Diesel. They asked him to be part of their Diesel Dreams ad campaign. “What they asked for,” recalls PES, “was this: a minute long film, the best idea I could give them, delivered by such and such a date to an office in Amsterdam, with no questions asked. It was carte blanche,

anything I wanted, no one to answer to creatively but myself. This has never happened to me again (as far as commercial work is concerned).”

It got even better. Not only would PES get paid to make the film, but he'd also be able to keep the ownership rights. PES saw this as a golden opportunity and certainly the biggest commercial break of his career. “Diesel was one of edgiest, best advertisers in the world,” says PES. “Their commercials were legendary. What they were offering me was basically free distribution of the *one* idea I wanted to put out there in the world more than any other. As long as I came through with one of the standout films of this 30-film collection, I was guaranteed to make a mark in the commercial world.”

PES added 30 seconds to the front of *Atomic Nut* and renamed it *KaBoom!* It was an immediate sensation; it went online in August 2004 and has received over a million hits.

*KaBoom!* was the hit of the Diesel films chosen for the campaign and PES started receiving commercial scripts from around the world. He'd make his mark.

PES has since done a number of commercials, but two in particular stand out: *Coinstar* (2005) and *Human Skateboard* (2007). *Coinstar*, a 60-second piece made to promote a coin machine, features coins that have been lost or forgotten in a house and are all heading to a living room table; once there, the coins, in a clever bit of animation, stack together to make a lady's shoe.

“I believed the idea was better suited to 60 seconds (it was originally commissioned as a 30-second piece),” adds PES, “and pitched the agency an approach that involved building out the back end of the film, the ‘stacking sequence’ which was not in

the original script. I felt it was important, once the coins made it to the final table, that we didn't just magically cut to a finished shoe but actually explored the process by which the hundreds of coins came together. Aside from making the coin shoe feel much more impressive, this stacking sequence — unlike the rest of the spot — was something that people hadn't seen before."

With *Human Skateboard*, made for Sneaux shoes, PES took a somewhat different approach and used stop-motion animation of real people: one guy as the skateboarder, another as the skateboard.

"This was the best concept I have ever seen from an advertising agency," says PES. "In four years of directing commercials this is the only time I looked at a script and was wowed by an idea. It felt more like a personal project than a commercial to me, like something I'd wake up and make on my own."

The only significant change that PES made to the piece was to shift the focus from the skateboarder to the skateboard. "There is not a single close-up of the rider. I felt the success of the commercial would be in direct proportion to how much viewers *felt* the pain and the exhilaration of the human skateboard."

By 2006, PES found himself suddenly saturated with the riches of commercial work and desiring to make his own film again. "On commercials it's easy to get spoiled as a director," says PES. "There's someone to do everything for you. All you have to do is ask and it's taken care of. *Game Over* (2006) was a personal challenge. I wanted to prove to myself that I could make a good film without relying on anyone else. I locked myself in a room for two months and did it. It's the only film I have ever done entirely on my own."

Inspired by an interview with Pac-Man creator Toru Iwatani — who said he got the idea from a pizza that was missing a slice — PES recreates vintage video games like *Space Invaders* and *Pac-Man* using his arsenal of objects. Like *KaBoom!*, *Game Over* toys with high- and lowbrow themes. It's another PES film inspired by childhood, but it's also tinged with a pinch of darkness: no matter how far you go in a game, you will always die. "Death is what I remembered most about gaming in the eighties. For me it was all about the one enemy who got you every time, not about the tens of thousands of invaders you killed successfully."

Now, if that ain't a metaphor for, well . . . you know . . . that crazy word called existence than I don't know what to tell ya. The message is simple: life's a game. Explore it. Enjoy it.

PES's most recent film, *Western Spaghetti* (2008) shows that, despite a reliance on the visual, he's still armed with some solid concepts. This time he takes on the task of making a spaghetti dinner — with, of course, objects replacing the food. Unlike his previous films, *Western Spaghetti* lacks that wallop of an ending: there's no surprise because we know where the film is heading — a spaghetti dinner. Instead, the film's humor and pleasure come from the unexpected, yet somehow fitting, choices that PES makes for the objects. Pick-up sticks replace the spaghetti, bubble wrap becomes boiling water, foil paper turns into oil and, most unusually, Post-it Notes become the butter.

Now, there's "Western" in the title, but no sign of Italian cowboys or Sergio Leone references, so what is the Western all about? "The 'Western' in the title," says PES, "refers to the endless supply of worthless, modern junk that populates so much of our

world. Google eyes, rubber bands, tinfoil, bubble wrap, keychain Rubik's Cubes, etc. It's all stuff most people are trying to throw away. There is beauty to be found in these objects."

PES's work reminds me of hanging out with my kids: they're juvenile, childish, magical, fun, repetitive, intelligent, perceptive, stupid, cute, vicious and silly. I wouldn't want it any other way. Sadly, the kids will grow up; let's hope that PES doesn't.